DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 777 SO 018 541

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TITLE The Pinch Pot Technique and Raku.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aesthetic Values; *Art Products; *Ceramics; Cultural Background; Cultural Education; *Cultural Influences; Foreign Countries; Global Approach; Religious Factors; *Sculpture
IDENTIFIERS *Japanese Art; Japanese Culture; *Raku; Zen Buddhism

ABSTRACT

Since the 16th century, the small Japanese raku tea bowl has reflected the merged cultural influences of art, religion, and other countries on the art of Japanese pottery. Artistically, the bowl is a combination of ceramics (pinching) and sculpture (carving). The dictates of the Zen Buddhist tea masters determine its sculptural process and steps, which include the carving of the exterior body, the base or the foot, the undulating lip or rim, and the interior, with its elevated design center. Its form is the result of a preference for the asymmetricality of Korean peasant Ido wares (which reflected the Zen aesthetic qualities of simplicity and roughness) over Chinese porcelain by Zen tea masters, the "pottery wars" during which Korean pottery and potters were transported to Japan, and the influence of various members of the Raku family. The Japanese pinch pot technique was transformed through the years into a unique ceramic process, producing the raku tea bowl, which continues to be produced by members of the Raku family. (AEM)

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THE PINCH POT TECHNIQUE AND RAKU

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1987

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Running head: The Pinch Pot

Abstract

The amazingly small Japanese raku tea bowl, from the 16th century to the present, is the embodiment of numerous influences: art, religion, and countries. Artistically, the bowl is a combination of ceramics (pinching) and sculpture (carving). The dictates of the Zen Buddhist tea masters determine its sculptural process and steps: Beginning with the carving of the exterior body, then, the base or foot, next, the undulating lip or rim, and finally, the interior with an elevated spiral design center. Its historical form is as a result of the preference for Korean pottery to Chinese porcelain in Japanese tea ceremonies, the "pottery wars," and the Raku family. The tea masters preferred the asymmetrical Korean peasant Ido wares which reflected the Zen aesthetic qualities of simplicity and roughness--displayed later in the raku tea bowl. The "pottery wars" transported Korean pottery and potters to Japan. In addition, a marriage between two potters (Korean and Japanese) continued the transformation of the pinch pot technique into a unique ceramic process and product, the raku tea bowl, which is still being produced today in Japan by generations of this family. (A Bibliography consists of 11 references.)

THE PINCH POT TECHNIQUE AND RAKU

From the 16th century to the present, the Japanese ceramic tea bowl has reflected the merged cultural influences of religion, countries, and art. The Chinese imported versions of Buddhism, which originated in 6th century India, became Zen Buddhism in Japan. The Japanese, however, in their Zen Buddhist tea ceremonies, preferred the Korean pottery to the Chinese porcelain. In addition, the "pottery wars" transported Korean artists to Japan, and this influx and other kinds of migration transformed the pinch pot technique into a unique ceramic process and product, the raku tea bowl.

For definition purposes, ceramics is the art and technology of forming, firing, and glazing clay objects. The technique originated during the Neolithic Age, and the term came later from the Greek keramos, meaning earthenware. There are two classifications: pottery and porcelain. The latter was invented in China in the 3rd or 5th century.

Ceramics, from a historical perspective, symbolizes established agricultural civilizations. Prehistoric ceramic objects have not been fround among nomads and hunters, e.g., American Plains Indians, Eskimos, South African bushpeople and in Australia, where the technique was totally unknown. Pottery was also not produced by the Phoenicians who

inhabited and migrated from the Coral Islands where suitable clays did not exist.

An ally of sculpture, ceramics is also a representation of the essence of three-dimensions. The pinch pot technique, for example, is created, modified, and enhanced through the sculptural approaches of manipulation (pinching), addition (modeling) and substraction (carving).

The pinch pot technique, probably the oldest form of ceramics, is an important introduction to the qualities of clay and three-dimensions. This technique is also the point of departure for creating a raku tea bowl.

However, before the potter begins the raku process of forming, a decision has to be made--to create a tea bowl for summer or winter. If the bowl is to be used in summer, it will be shorter, flatter with a large rim diameter. The winter bowl, in contrast, will be taller with a smaller diameter to prevent the rapid cooling of the tea.

The Zen Buddhist tea masters and their ceremonial objectives have influenced the steps for creating a raku bowl. In the first step, the human thumb is inserted into a ball of clay--opening it--which is then turned slowly in one hand and shaped completely by the slow rhythmic finger pinching of the other hand.

At the end of this pinching stage, a mug-like form with a thick base is created. This asymmetrical form, not perfectly round, is turned upside down and allowed to dry for a day or less until leather hard. That is, this pot, once leather hard, can be handled without fear of distorting its shape.

The pinch pot, at this stage, has been designed to conform to being held in both hands. This is the normal way that a bowl is held in the drinking of tea. To definitely achieve this purpose, some potters take the not quite dry, semi-leather hard, pot and gently toss it into the air several times, catching it in both hands.

Once the bowl has become leather hard, the potter dampens its interior with a little water. The bowl is then turned upside down. A bamboo knife is used to carve the exterior by shaving its walls in profile and, usually with one stroke of the blade, producing the foot or base.

The purpose of the foot is to properly elevate the bowl. The foot is also tested for <u>stability</u> by placing the bowl on a flat surface and for <u>comfort</u> by placing it in the palm of both hands.

The interior of the bowl is continuously dampened as surplus clay is carved away from the exterior, until desired modifications are achieved. The bowl, during this carving

process, is constantly tested for a good relationship to the hands. Consideration is also given to thickness and thinness of the walls. They are not to be too thick or too thin. Tea must remain warm, and the bowl is not be inconveniently hot when held.

Once the walls of the bowl are satisfactorily carved, attention is given next to its rim or lips. The rim of a raku bowl is an undulating formation of peaks and hills that bend inward. They rise, fall and roll in a series of usually three, five or seven hills.

When the rim has been effectively completed, the interior of the bowl is then carved with caution and with the support of its exterior walls. The thickness of the clay is again frequently checked, for the ideal form will have appropriate thickness at all points. The center of the bowl should be a slightly raised spiral design which will help support the bamboo whisk and collect the last drops of tea.

A raku bowl has been traditionally developed in the lead glaze color of red, black or white. The color of raku, however, is incomplete until blended with green tea which is filled to its rim.

Because of the raku firing technique, a glaze is not melted uniformly. Using iron tongs, a glaze-coated low-fired bisque bowl is placed in a pre-heated kiln, temperature

750-800°C. When the glaze has melted, within 10 to 15 minutes, the glowing hot bowl is removed from the kiln, again with tongs, and set to cool. Because of the swift cooling, the thickly applied glaze will crackle and form a harmonious line pattern. Tong marks on a raku bowl are also considered to be a beautifying factor.

Korean potters in Japan invented this raku firing technique. In using tongs to remove still hot tiles from kilns, these artisans discovered that the tiles did not crack or break because of the clay's high sand content.

To completely see, understand and value a raku tea bowl, additional brief historical information is provided for Japan, Zen Buddhism, tea ceremony, pottery wars, and Korean artists. For notably, Japan, an island culture cut off by the seas, developed much later than China and Korea. As a result, the influences of China and Korea are inevitably reflected in the religion and pottery of Japan.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan in 552 A.D. However, over half a century later in 1191, Eisai (Zenko Kokuski, 1141-1215), a Buddhist priest returning from China, introduced Zen Buddhism and tea to Japan.

Zen Buddhism, the Japanese translation of the Chinese "Ch'an," aimed at bringing salvation to the common individual through personal effort. Unlike the concept of faith,

emphasis was on austerity, simplicity, intuitive response and a looking into one's true inner self. The major tools for achieving this inner state of enlightenment were meditation and self-reliance. Enlightenment was also attained through perception and contemplation of the beauty, significance of the simplest, mundane activities and objects. Zen followers further believed that the present-time and the immediacy of actual experience were reality and the moment of truth.

Eisai is regarded as the founder of Japanese Zen Buddhism and the father of the tea culture. This priest introduced cha, the drinking of tea, to the Shogun Minamoto Sanetomo (1192-1219), a samurai ruler of Japan. In turn, Sanetomo and the other 12th century politically prominent samurai promoted Zen Buddhism and started the tea ceremony culture. Their favorite Zennist activity was the drinking of powdered tea while practicing the art of painting and composing poems.

Equivalent to the medieval English knights, the samurai constituted 6 percent of the Japanese population. They lived a simple, frugal life which emphasized self-discipline and fine character. Ironically, they were involved in the dual activities of farming and warfare.

Yet it was not until the 15th century that the Buddhist priest Murata Shuko (1423-1502) established a formal relationship between Zen and tea drinking. Known as the

father of the tea ceremony (Cha-no-yu, hot water for tea), Shuko sought a spiritual relationship between host and guests: Rank and status were forgotten during the ritual of the tea ceremony.

However, Sen-No Rikyo (1521-1591), known as Japan's greatest tea master, re-conceived the tea ceremony in its final form. This Buddhist priest extended the Zennist characteristics of purity, peacefulness, austerity and abstraction. At its zenith in Kyoto, the center for the ceremony, Rikyu perfected the philosophy of tea to involve tranquility conducive to contemplation, restricted conversation and a chosen setting with chosen utensils.

China supplied the idea of the tea ceremony, tea utensils and methods of grinding and infusing the powdered tea. The Japanese, however, invented the tea house.

Usually a simple, small, often thatched structure, the tea house was constructed in a beautiful stylized garden. Irregular, moss-covered stones led the guests to the house where they crouched to enter the low door, symbolically leaving the outside world and humbling themselves for the Zen ceremony of simplicity and refined poverty.

Chato, tea utensils, included bowls, jars, flower pots, incense containers and tea caddies. Other accessories included the lamp, iron kettle and kettle stand. All were

made in accordance with Zen teachings: simple with rough surfaces.

The chawan, tea bowl, was the most important utensil. All other utensils were selected to enhance its interest and qualities.

Rikyu replaced the Chinese Temmoku tea bowls and other porcelain utensils with the crackled loquat yellow glazed Korean Ido wares. These simple Ido bowls, with a lack of symmetry and an appearance of roughness, were soft and pleasant to the touch.

The tea ceremony, as re-conceived by Rikyu, consisted of simple events. The posture and movements of the participants were formal and relaxed, and for their visual pleasure, a poem and flower arrangement usually hung on a wall.

After the host and guests exchanged greetings, a simple meal was served, followed by the drinking of tea. This part of the meal was prepared in the presence of the guests. The host placed powdered leaves of the plant thea sinensis in hot water and used a bamboo whisk to whip the tea to a green froth. Each guest took a bowl of tea, using first the right hand to place it in the left palm with a slight rotation. Then with the security of both hands, about three sips of tea were taken. At the end of activity, the host and

guests expressed comments and appreciation for the utensils, interior design, flower arrangement, poem, garden, and seasons.

The power and popularity of the tea ceremony lasted from the 1570s to the first quarter of the 17th century. This cultural, religious phenomenon was also enhanced by the outcome of the pottery wars and the products of the Raku family.

The pottery wars were the two invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), Japan's military ruler. Hideyoshi's goal was to conquer China, beginning with invasions of Korea. When the warriers of Hideyoshi's invasions returned to their fiefdoms, they brought the coveted Korean tea bowls and prisoners, the potters known for their superior skills. It is thus difficult to determine today whether large quantities of these tea bowls were created in Korea or by Korean potters in Japan.

In addition to the war prisoners, other Korean artisans, before and after the pottery wars, came to Japan, on a voluntary basis, to settle and open kilns in many areas. As a result, a revolution in Japanese ceramic art occurred during the same period of the popularity of the tea ceremony, which established the tea masters, with a preference for the Korean bowls, as the arbiters of taste and style of pottery.

It was also during this 16th century period that some of the most famous tea bowls, raku, were created. In 1521, the Korean potter Ameya came to Japan, married a Japanese woman potter and adopted the Japanese surname of Sokei. After the death of Ameya, his widow became a nun, settled about 1550 in Kyoto and continued to create her pottery.

Her son Chojiro (1515-1592), following in the tradition of his parents, was honored by Rikyu as a master potter. Through the guidance of this priest, Chojiro made his first bowls for the tea ceremony in about 1580. Some sources indicate that this potter's best work seems to reflect the ideas of Rikyu.

This priest's first choice of tea bowls, nevertheless, continued to be the Korean Ido and then the wares of Chojiro. Despite this preference for Korean tea bowls, Rikyu was finally responsible for the further development of the Japanese ceramic industry.

Chojiro has also been honored as the founder of the Raku dynasty. Rikyu introduced his tea bowls to Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) and Hideyoshi, military rulers, avid collectors of such utensils, and promoters of the tea ceremony. Hideyoshi, later in appreciation and honor of the memory of Chojiro, gave the son Jokai (Raku II) the raku symbol stamped on a gold seal. The term Raku was derived from a Chinese ideogram,

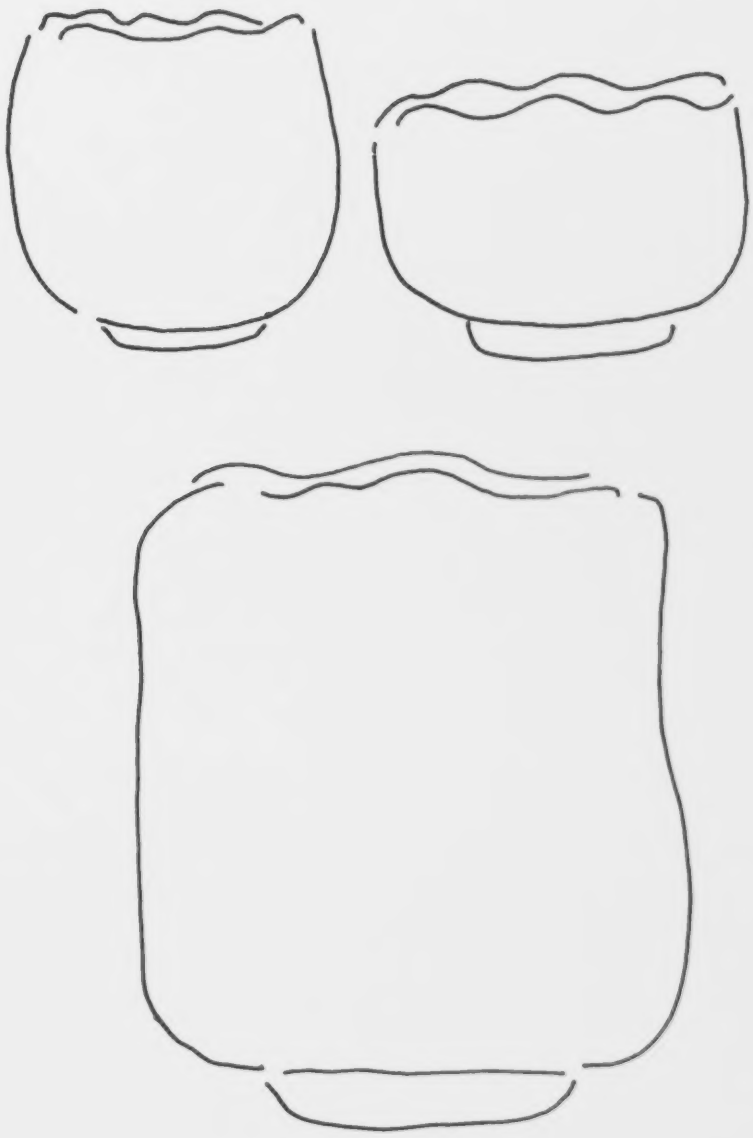
meaning enjoyment, ease, pleasure, quiet and happiness. From this period to the 20th century, Jokei and his successors have used this symbol to stamp their pottery.

Significantly, the Zen Buddhist tea ceremony and its masters have been responsible for the creation, appreciation and understanding of raku pottery and a family, by tradition, trained as sculptors. The forming techniques used in their pottery have consequently been drawn from the art of sculpture, and such an art promoted productions that symbolized the Zen concept of beauty, the simple and unassuming qualities that are in harmony with everyday life.

Illustrations in Fig. 1 reflect some of the major characteristics of the raku tea bowls--

- Handbuilt, without the use of a wheel.
- With bases that provide proper elevation.
- Carved with irregular, rolling rims.
- Without handles, the presence of only asymmetrical, organic forms.
- All fired in a pre-heated kiln.
- Dissimilar; no matches; each form is different.
- Designed with individual rules for handling and for the drinking of only tea.
- Ugly when placed in a museum, for their beauty is based on the coordination of movement, design, time, and handling.

Figure 1



It was thus this 16th century Korean and Japanese marriage of artisans that produced a successive line of raku potters, who, if they had no son or son-in-law to carry on the tradition, adopted a pupil and gave him their name. The Raku family is now beyond its 14th generation and still continues to work at its traditional art in Kyoto.

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